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Progressing Knowledge in Alternative and Local Food Networks: Critical Reflections and a Research Agenda

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Abstract

In the now extensive literature on alternative food networks (AFNs) (e.g. farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, box schemes), a body of work has pointed to socio-economic problems with such systems, which run counter to headline claims in the literature. This paper argues that rather than being a reflection of inherent complexities in such food systems, the continued uncertainties about the fundamental nature and development of AFNs are, at least in part, a function of how AFNs are often conceptualised and investigated, which ultimately impedes progress in knowledge of such systems. After introducing the main theoretical perspectives of research in the field, and setting out what is known currently about AFNs and their characteristics, the paper goes on to articulate four features of AFN research which, it is argued, give rise to problems in this field. In particular, the paper identifies inconsistent use of concepts and terms, conflation of the structural characteristics of food systems with desired outcomes and/or actor behaviours, insufficient acknowledgement of the problems of marketplace trading, and a continued lack of a consumer perspective. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for future research into AFNs that seeks to break current boundaries and encourage greater progress in knowledge in this field.

Keywords: alternative food networks; food chain localisation; socio-economic analysis; critique.

1. Introduction

Since the early to mid-1990s, an extensive literature has developed on alternative food systems or networks (AFNs). These may be described as forms of food provisioning with characteristics deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream¹ modes which dominate in developed countries. Examples that have been studied include localised and short food supply chains (Marsden et al., 2000; Hinrichs, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Ilbery and Maye, 2005a), farmers' markets (FMs) (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2006), community supported agriculture (CSA) (Allen et al., 2003), and community gardens and organic schemes (Macias, 2008). The socio-economic virtues of such food networks have long been extolled, particularly for farming and rural communities, but also for small retailers, consumers and others in regional economies. Such networks have also been argued to foster ecological benefits including reduced food miles and carbon emissions, and encouragement of more extensive agricultural production. Yet whilst these claims have tended to headline the AFN literature, a body of work – partly theoretical, partly empirical, and offered by scholars from different disciplines – has for some time pointed to a range of problems and with these systems. From a socio-economic perspective for example, some localised food initiatives may maintain rather than overturn pre-existing inequalities between participants (Allen et al., 2003; Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), and exhibit insularity and defensiveness rather than openness (Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). Recent work has also begun to question the positive environmental impacts of AFNs (e.g. Edwards-Jones et al., 2008; Oglethorpe, 2009).

When any literature reaches such a point in knowledge development, where a growing body of work opposes the prevailing wisdom and challenges its assumptions, it is

appropriate to take stock, reflect critically on the evidence and consider what it means for the focus and direction of future research. In fact, several reflective contributions already exist in the AFN literature, from scholars who have, for example, critically compared the perspectives of north American and European research (Goodman, 2003), explored how relationships between alternative and conventional systems are theorised (Watts et al, 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006) and how meanings of alterity are constructed (e.g. Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000). Empirically too, authors have reflected on problematic findings and offered novel ways of conceptualising AFNs in an effort to move thinking forward (Hinrichs, 2000; Allen et al, 2003; Harrison et al, 2006). Yet in spite of these contributions and developments, it seems that the literature has reached something of an impasse, with some debates and exchanges appearing to entrench scholars in established theoretical positions, rather than encourage the breaking of new boundaries. As scholarship on alterity in other fields such as urban regeneration and community development (Amin et al., 2003) and creative industries (Crewe et al., 2003) reveals, knowledge progress in alternative systems is enhanced by conceptual transparency and a willingness on the part of researchers to question prevailing orthodoxies. Hence, the aim of this paper is to offer a fresh critical review of the AFN literature, consolidating the current state of knowledge in a direct way and, by building on existing critical contributions such as those mentioned above, to articulate on-going problems in AFN research which may be impeding the development of our understanding of these food systems.

The text is structured as follows. First, an overview is given of different theoretical perspectives adopted in AFN research, and the contribution of each one to knowledge. Second, the paper summarises the outputs of these strands of work in terms of what,

overall, is claimed to be beneficial about AFNs and what is adverse. Next, the paper identifies and discusses the four key features of AFN research which, it is argued, have created a problematic state of knowledge in this field, specifically: unclear and inconsistent use of concepts; conflation of structural characteristics of AFNs with desired outcomes and/or actor behaviours; insufficient acknowledgement of the problems of marketplace trading; and a continued lack of a consumer perspective. Finally, a set of research recommendations is offered which suggests avenues for future study that are intended to break the mould of existing scholarship, to explore new territory. Ultimately, it is hoped that the ideas expressed in this paper will contribute to knowledge progress on AFNs by stimulating debate and encouraging fresh perspectives and new approaches to research in this important field.

2. Theoretical Perspectives in AFN Literature

Across the now extensive literature, scholars have approached the investigation of AFNs from a variety of conceptual and theoretical positions. Drawing in particular from reviews by Wilkinson (2006), Goodman (2003) and Murdoch (2000), three main sets of perspective are introduced here, on the basis that the studies within each tend to adopt ontological and methodological approaches distinct from the others. It is emphasised that the grouping of perspectives offered here is not intended as definitive or exhaustive, nor that every element in each perspective is mutually exclusive of the others. Rather, the purpose is to give a sense of how, conceptually and theoretically, different strands of work have tackled AFNs and the knowledge contributions they have made, to better contextualise and inform the main critiques set out later in the paper.

Political economy is the first key perspective that can be identified in AFN research. Inspired by a Marxian approach to understanding of the social world, it takes the position that large-scale political and economic structures, in particular the forces of neo-liberalist politics and global capitalism, can largely explain micro-level patterns of human behaviour and choice, and that the imperative of social science research is to expose and seek to redress the inequalities and injustices that these forces inflict on well-being. In terms of AFN research, studies by Allen et al (2003) and Goodman (2004) can be considered illustrative of a political economy perspective, being focused on explaining the development trajectories and outcomes of localisation initiatives in terms of the political and economic realities shaping those initiatives, and conceptualising AFNs as movements in constant struggle against threatening forces of global capitalism.

What contributions have political economy studies made to knowledge of AFNs? First, by bringing attention to important contextual forces that shape food systems, and using them to explain how AFNs develop, these studies identify, and offer an explanation for, the inequalities and injustices that can emerge in such systems. As such, this strand of literature has often offered a valuable counterweight to more idealistic positions on AFNs and it is noteworthy that many of the problems of AFNs revealed so far in the literature have come from scholars in this field. Furthermore, researchers within this strand have also sought to build on these critical insights by offering re-thinking of concepts, an example being the ‘reflexive localism’ concept of DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and DuPuis et al. (2006). Built on an analysis of theories of social justice, the concept is a vision of localism whereby the processes of political decision-making are constructed to give the best possibility for democratic

outcomes, for example by maximising open, respectful dialogue between participants. As a result, it is argued, AFNs underpinned by reflexive localism avoid being hijacked by powerful socio-political elites and economic interests, but nevertheless are more than a loose collection of disparate actors pursuing their own agendas. Overall therefore, the political economy body of work has offered a valuable and intriguing contribution to AFN knowledge, although it is not without critique. Murdoch (2000), for example, argues that this perspective struggles to explain the survival of agrifood SME clusters or *filières* such as those found in France and northern Italy, which do not operate according to the conventional logic of global capitalism but which appear to prosper in spite of its presence. Furthermore, as will be argued later, the impulse within the political economy field to ascribe socio-political objectives to AFNs can be considered a problematic conflation of spatial scale with actor behaviours/motivations, and the concept of reflexive localism, too, can be critiqued for being somewhat idealistic.

A second set of AFN studies takes what may be described as a rural sociology or development perspective. Work here shares the position of political economists that mainstream agrifood systems, shaped by global capitalism, have strong marginalising and dehumanising effects, and that AFNs have the potential to redress those effects. However scholars in this strand tend to be preoccupied specifically with the rural area implications of these dynamics, and employ different theoretical bases for explaining the redress potential of AFNs, e.g. referring to theories of endogenous growth rather than Marx. Moreover, whereas the political economy perspective conceptualises AFNs and their development trajectories strongly in terms of political and economic forces, in this strand many scholars take the approach of AFNs as social constructions

or embodiments of the members of local (rural) communities themselves, as expressions of the beliefs, values and motivations of those members as they pursue activities that they hope will lead to socio-economic gains. Empirical investigations in this field typically explore these phenomena at a micro level, invoking sociological interpretations of concepts such as embeddedness, trust, quality and care as theoretical underpinnings (e.g. Sage, 2003; Kirwan, 2004; Kneafsey et al., 2008).

In terms of contribution, scholars in the rural development field offer reasoned explanations of how AFN initiatives may deliver positive socio-economic benefits, via a vision of effective leveraging by communities of (particularly endogenous) resources and capital (e.g. Renting et al, 2003; van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004). Furthermore, the studies within this strand that conceptualise AFNs as social constructions, and which obtain narratives of the lived experiences of AFN participants, offer perhaps the most direct explanations of how and why actor behaviour in AFNs can appear so different from mainstream systems. The micro-level detail of the analyses in this field, combined with the sensitivity to social and symbolic dimensions, has also revealed unexpected tensions in AFNs, such as feelings of obligation amongst customers of FMs in small rural communities (Sage, 2003), or the reactionary and nostalgic, rather than progressive, ways such events are presented (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000). These have all been important insights. In terms of critique however, political economists such as DuPuis and Goodman (2005) argue that because work in this field takes insufficient account of the wider political and economic forces shaping AFNs, the resulting accounts of AFNs as vehicles for community integration tend to be selective and positively biased, overlooking underlying inequalities and injustices. For example, they argue that as scholars in this

field tend to accept unquestioningly that commercial farming is the linchpin for rural development, they overlook the continued exploitation of certain groups (e.g. immigrant farm workers, women). Meanwhile, Guthman (2008) points out that the market-based logic of endogenous growth, with its implications for premium pricing, appropriation of resources and protection of property rights sits rather uneasily alongside notions of community integration. Furthermore, as argued later, despite work in this strand revealing important insights into behavioural and symbolic tensions around AFNs, the continuing impulse of many studies to hold fast to original positive claims about the inherent social benefits of AFNs rather than address these tensions, means opportunities to re-theorise the social and symbolic dynamics of such systems are missed.

Modes of governance and network theory perspectives constitute a third strand of literature on AFNs. In these perspectives, the scale of analysis is strongly meso-level, with food systems being conceptualised as networks or clusters of actors operating at the scale of regions or states. The development of such systems is then explained as the result of interaction and negotiation processes between those actor groups, and the power and control issues they face, against an active backdrop of pertinent regulatory and institutional environments. Examples of work falling within this field would include economic geography inspired studies of food systems in industrial districts or territorial clusters, such as Brunori and Rossi's (2007) examination of competing factions in the Chianti wine region, or DuPuis and Block's (2008) account of milk supply chains in Chicago and New York. Although with a different emphasis, studies inspired by regulation and conventions theory can also be considered within this strand, where explanations of food system development focus on the codes of practice

in such systems, and how competing bodies develop, interpret and apply them (e.g. Stassart and Jamar, 2008). Finally, work that draws from theories of the production of (scientific) knowledge could also be considered part of this strand, to the extent that these studies concern themselves with the nature of collaboration and conflict between actor groups at a meso scale, albeit the focus of explanation turns towards the processes of production (or coproduction) of key pieces of knowledge (e.g. standards, certifications), and the effect these have on interactions between actors and subsequent evolution of initiatives. DuPuis and Gillon's (2009) examination of the development of organic standards in the US is illustrative here.

Modes of governance and network theory studies offer valuable perspectives on what AFNs are and how they evolve. First, work in this strand shares with the rural sociology field a conceptualisation of AFNs as social constructs, best understood via examination of the composition of actors involved, and their goals and strategies, which opens the door to new possibilities of explanation. However it may be argued that governance and network theory's preoccupation with institutions and regulation at the meso-level adds a further explanatory dimension, by offering a rationale for why apparently similar actors, with similar goals and agendas, end up pursuing different strategies (e.g. DuPuis and Block, 2008), or why some actors' agendas end up dominating others (Stassart and Jamar, 2008; Brunori and Rossi, 2007). By the same token, this added dimension also brings fresh insights into familiar concepts such as trust, reciprocity and solidarity, being viewed as phenomena that are coproduced and manipulated by contesting actors/factions, through vehicles of certification/regulation. A second useful perspective of this strand of research is that, in contrast to the other two perspectives, studies tend to avoid conflating spatial scale

with specific actor values or behaviours. Thus, whereas political economy studies have an impulse to ascribe a particular anti-capitalist socio-political status to (particularly) local food systems, and rural sociology and development studies tend to attribute particular sets of social relations to such systems, work in this strand often takes the position of the local as one spatial scale of activity where complex things happen, and the job of the researcher is to explain why certain food systems exhibit particular behaviours and impacts, rather than assuming *a priori* that they should possess them inherently. In terms of critique however, it may be argued that some studies in this strand, perhaps as a result of the need to simplify what would otherwise be unwieldy data, end up constructing too straightforward a narrative of causal forces in the development trajectories of AFNs, not leaving enough room for other explanations to emerge.

Having introduced and compared different theoretical perspectives in AFN research, the next section summarises, in totality, what these strands of literature say about such food systems, first in terms of how they may be beneficial, and second, problematic..

3. What is known about AFNs? Key Arguments, Claims and Evidence

3.1 What are AFNs and how can they be beneficial?

A commonly referenced definition of AFNs is that offered by Feenstra (1997): “rooted in particular places, [AFNs] aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound production and distribution practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community”. To identify the accepted distinguishing characteristics of AFNs therefore, the components of this definition will be taken in turn. First, a key characteristic claimed for AFNs is their

anchoring in a particular locale. This may be through production, processing, retailing and consumption taking place within a prescribed geographic area (e.g. Marsden et al.'s (2000) 'short chain' networks), and/or through the exchange of products which embody the natural and/or cultural features of a local area (e.g. Ilbery et al.'s (2006) 'locality' foods), even if the latter are retailed and/or consumed at some distance from the area of production (e.g. Renting et al.'s (2003) 'extended' chains). For many, the notion of AFNs being anchored in specific places contrasts with the perceived rootless nature of foods from conventional systems, whose origins are considered to be ambiguous or multiple in nature. A second characteristic claimed for AFNs is their orientation towards economic viability for the actors involved. Thus, farmers may benefit via increased product margins (La Trobe, 2001; Pretty, 2001), opportunities for diversification and entrepreneurship (Morris and Buller, 2003; Bentley et al., 2003) or building of new skill sets (Brown and Miller, 2008; Higgins et al., 2008), whilst consumers may gain via more reasonably priced fresh, healthy food (La Trobe, 2001; Little et al, 2009). The wider community may also benefit via multiplier effects which provide employment and income opportunities for non-agricultural actors (Sage, 2003; Ilbery et al, 2004). Again, for many, these features contrast with the perceived widespread economic exploitation of actors in conventional food chains. A third characteristic of AFNs is their basis in ecological sustainability, represented by reduced food miles and carbon emissions, and a move forward in the sustainable farming agenda (Renting et al, 2003). Finally, are the claims regarding the social justice characteristics of AFNs, the argument being that as AFNs can reconfigure relations between producers and consumers (Whatmore et al, 2003; Kirwan, 2006; Feagan, 2007), bringing these actors into closer proximity and mutual understanding, the resulting relationships are more respectful, trustful and committed (Ilbery and

Maye, 2005a; Kirwan, 2006; Smithers et al., 2008). Meanwhile, on a wider scale, AFNs may encourage more harmonious community relations (Winter, 2003), and more democratic participation of actors into food provisioning (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Hinrichs, 2003; Goodman, 2004). Overall therefore, a range of social, economic and ecological benefits has been claimed for AFNs and, as argued earlier, these claims have tended to headline the AFN literature to date. The paper now turns to the counterarguments and evidence, summarising what researchers in the field have indicated about the adverse side of such networks.

3.2 How can AFNs be Problematic or Adverse?

For the purposes of this section, the counterarguments and evidence are summarised under three main headings: (i) problems with how AFNs interact with, and impact on, wider systems and economies; (ii) difficulties with how actors internal to AFNs relate to each other; and (iii) questions over the personal values and motivations of AFN actors².

(i) How AFNs interact with, and impact on, wider systems and economies.

In Section 3.1, the headline arguments were presented about AFNs as more democratic forms of food provisioning, with the potential for far-reaching impacts on wider food systems and regional economies, beyond the bounds of the network clusters themselves. Three sets of counterargument and evidence exist to challenge these arguments. First, in terms of their bearing towards external systems, some studies identify protectionist and exclusionary orientations in AFNs rather than openness. Hinrichs (2003) observes this, for example, in her study of localisation initiatives in Iowa, whilst Hinrichs and Allen (2008) identify ‘social justice blinders’

in some Buy Local campaigns, whereby disadvantaged groups falling outside a campaigns' defined constituency end up excluded from the network, e.g. racial-ethnic, class or nationality groups. Rather than pioneering change in trading relations across food systems therefore, AFNs can exhibit inward-looking dynamics, a feature political economists such as DuPuis et al. (2006) attribute, in part, to localisation initiatives fitting as well into conservative, protectionist agendas as into left-leaning, participatory agendas. Second, it is argued that AFNs do not necessarily offer positive multiplier effects for wider regional economies (Goodman 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005) - sometimes, the direction of economic dependency points the opposite way. For example, Brown and Miller (2008) identify that many farmers who engage in alternative networks such as FMs and CSA find these activities insufficient to sustain their incomes, hence they rely on external systems to retain their viability, e.g. by drawing on state support or cross-subsidy from other (mainstream) activities. Even where positive multiplier effects can be identified, evidence suggests that launches of AFNs in a region may incur detrimental impacts on other economic activities. Thus, although Brown and Miller (2008) conclude positively about the overall net gains of FMs to local economies, they report losses to several businesses sectors, as a result of consumer spend dropping in local grocery stores. Furthermore, where launches of AFNs are stimulated by state support, there are undesirable consequences in terms of creating competitive distortion in the wider community. In their study of specialist food retailers in the Scottish/English Borders for example, Ilbery and Maye (2006) found respondents were critical of the FMs and farm shops set up in their area with grant assistance, on the basis that these outlets did not compete on an equal footing, yet made sourcing local produce harder for established retailers. Finally, some work questions perhaps the most far-reaching claim about the

impact of AFNs on wider economies: their potency as tools for regeneration of disadvantaged regions. Specifically, in their index of food localisation in England and Wales, Ricketts Hein et al. (2006) find that counties with the greatest concentration of initiatives tended to be those already rich in resources and a diverse agricultural base. The implication, therefore, is that proliferation of AFNs is a product, rather than a driver, of socio-economic development in a region. In a related argument, DuPuis and Goodman (2005) express caution about the widespread advocacy and pursuit of AFNs as vehicles for wider economic development, on the basis that the effectiveness of such initiatives rests on genuine differentiation. If every region or state encourages their proliferation therefore, competing on the same platform, the outcome may be a zero sum gain across all regions, with the most disadvantaged regions struggling the most to perform.

(ii). How actors internal to AFNs relate to each other

The second area of contestation in AFN literature relates to the nature of relationships within these networks. Headline claims assert that AFNs capture buyers and sellers who are marginalised by mainstream food systems, bringing them together in novel relationships distinguished by enhanced justice and equity. However, some studies counter-argue that AFNs do not inherently orchestrate this. For example, political economists have argued that AFN initiatives built on the support of family farms do not deliver food systems with novel or just internal relations, in part because such systems perpetuate the hidden inequalities of relations in family farming systems (e.g. concerning gender, labour relations, workskills incomes), and partly because the value-adding basis of farming-centred initiatives only serves to deepen conventional commercial connections with affluent consumers (Goodman, 2004). These arguments

have empirical support. For example Allen et al (2003) identify poor treatment of farm workers in their study of contemporary AFNs in California, whilst in terms of FMs, surveys of customers (e.g. Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2006; Jarosz, 2008) indicate that many are affluent, professional or retired people, not those marginalised from mainstream food systems. In CSA too, doubts are raised about participant profile and nature of relations. Macias (2008), in a study of different types of AFN in Vermont, found that the CSA initiative failed to attract economically disadvantaged participants until specific actions were put in place to reach them, whilst in her account of community food movements in New York, Slocum (2006) critiques the internal relationships she observes, arguing that these movements perpetuated rather than overturned historically iniquitous social relations. Overall therefore, a substantial body of work exists to challenge the headline claims that AFNs embody novel configurations of participants who interact with each other in more just and equitable ways.

(iii) Personal values and motivations of AFN actors.

The final area of contestation in AFN literature relates to the argument that those who get involved in such systems exhibit values and motivations which are radically different from, or in opposition to those associated with mainstream food systems. Researchers in the governance and network theory strands of literature offer a counter position to these claims, through their conceptualisation of initiatives as complex networks of actors with multiple beliefs and motivations. Studies from the rural sociology field, based on direct testimony from AFN participants about their motivations for involvement, also offer evidence to counter the headline claim. In FMs for example, pragmatic self-interest is often found, with vendors citing better

margins/profit as the main reasons for engaging in such channels (Morris and Buller, 2003; Kirwan, 2006), and shoppers citing access to reasonably priced, fresh, high quality food as a main motivation (La Trobe, 2001; Bentley et al, 2003). Similarly, Winter (2003) notes that farmers who engage in direct selling do not necessarily do so for sustainability reasons, and may continue with pre-existing intensive production regardless of the switch to local channels. Motivational evidence relating to CSA involvement is scarce, but for example, DeLind's (1999) account of the setting up and operation of a CSA in Michigan highlights how participants vary in terms of their perceptions of involvement and that not all those who take part do so to be citizen activists. Another strand of evidence which casts doubt on involvement in AFNs as a radical protest against mainstream systems is that which reveals the level of everyday engagement of AFN actors in both alternative and conventional systems. Although empirical studies often do not measure actors' sales and purchases through AFNs as a proportion of their total sales and purchases (Jones et al, 2004), the work which has been done suggests it is, on average, a small proportion. For example, Brown and Miller's (2008) review of US FMs notes that only 25-30% of stallholders sell their produce exclusively through FMs. Ilbery and Maye (2005a; 2005b), in their investigations of livestock producers and specialist retailers in the Scottish/English Borders, reveal how their interviewees dipped in and out of conventional chains, with some gravitating towards larger wholesalers and retailers as their businesses matured, as these relationships were considered more stable. Evidence relating to consumer engagement in conventional channels tells a similar story. In their survey of FM shoppers in Ontario, Smithers et al. (2008) found respondents doing on average only 30% of their total grocery shop at FMs, whilst in the UK, McEachern et al. (2010)

report that FM shoppers are willing to forgo their principles in order to gain time and cost advantages of shopping in supermarkets.

So far, this paper has given an overview of how AFN research has approached its subject matter, and what the resulting claims have been, with the key areas of contestation highlighted. Overall, the processes of claim, evidence and counterclaim have certainly progressed knowledge of these systems. However, as suggested earlier, in spite of quite longstanding recognition of these contestations, and at least some direct debate by scholars from different perspectives (e.g. Goodman 2004; van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004), something of an impasse appears to have been reached and a range of fundamental questions about AFNs still exist. Why do some FMs, CSAs or community food initiatives exhibit problems whilst others appear to achieve virtuous goals? Which combinations of forces and factors best explain this variation? Ultimately, how can the socio-economic outcomes of AFNs be moderated and enhanced? It is contended here that these persistent fundamental uncertainties about AFNs are not so much a function of the inherent complexities of the systems themselves, but rather of certain problematic features exhibited in AFN research itself, which have the effect of hampering or undermining the contributions to knowledge that are offered. The next section presents and explains these features in the form of a critique. It is emphasised that much of the material presented draws from existing work by scholars both from within the AFN literature, as well from other disciplines. The aim here is to add value by bringing the disparate arguments together concisely, articulating them in a fresh way, and by offering some additional, novel critical points under each theme.

4. Problematic Features in AFN Research

4.1 Insufficient Clarity and Consistency in Usage of Key Concepts

The first problematic feature identifiable in AFN research is a tendency to accept unclear and inconsistent usage of key concepts and terms. This feature has already been raised as an issue by several scholars (e.g. Goodman, 2003; Ilbery et al. 2006), however for the purposes of this section, unclear and inconsistent usage is explained and illustrated with reference to two specific types of concept. Overall, the proposal is that in AFN scholarship, an over-reliance is developing towards ‘fuzzy concepts’ as described by Markusen (1999), with detrimental consequences for knowledge progress.

First, it is contended that a lack of clarity exists in concepts which refer to organised activities or efforts that are observable by researchers. The concept of ‘AFN’ itself can be used to illustrate. In the literature, ‘AFN’ tends to be employed as a universal term, to denote food systems that are somehow different from the mainstream. Hence, the concept is defined according to what the phenomenon is not, rather than what it is. Thereafter, the real world manifestations deemed to fall within this catchall are very diverse, and hence the bases upon which AFNs are considered ‘alternative’ vary widely. Sometimes, it is the nature of the channel structure which is considered alternative, i.e. the short chain relations between producers and consumers that exist in FMs or box schemes (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003)⁻³. Sometimes, it is the governance or financing arrangements underpinning the AFN, i.e. the unconventional trading relationships exhibited by CSA and community food initiatives. Sometimes, it is the characteristics of the products being exchanged which make the difference, as is the case in AFN initiatives involving foods that embody the

natural and cultural features distinctive to a local area. Finally, some AFNs are deemed alternative because of the goals or motivations of the actors involved, which could denote any or none of the aforementioned examples, depending on a researcher's assessment of the participants' values.

Why is it problematic if 'AFN' is used as a universal term for a heterogeneous set of food systems, or that the key unifying feature of the concept is according to what AFNs are not rather than what they are? Taking heterogeneity first, it is not unusual nor in itself problematic to scholarship to encounter diversity in real world phenomena. To make progress however, discrimination is needed in the face of heterogeneity and the specific properties that different systems or activities may be expected to exhibit require clear articulation in advance of empirical study. However, in many studies of single types of AFN such as FMs or CSA, rather than articulating and justifying in advance the exact basis on which the chosen type is considered 'alternative', there is a tendency to allude to the features and benefits of many types of AFNs in the contextualisation, then in the account of the empirical findings, to report and discuss the existence of a selection of these features, with respect to how they confirm or confound the headline argument. Without offering discriminating, explicit statements of expectations, however, such contributions are weakened as they can be based on conflation between features and benefits of other types of AFNs, and on false assumptions about the specific type of AFN examined. Therefore, tendencies to rely on the term 'AFN' as a convenient shorthand, rather than as a starting point for careful, discriminating examination and theorizing, is problematic for knowledge progress .

The definition of a concept such as AFN by referring to what it is not, rather than what it is, is problematic for different reasons. As scholars such as Holloway et al. (2007) and Sonnino and Marsden (2006) observe, AFN scholarship has long tended to bifurcate agrifood systems into two types or ‘zones’ – mainstream, conventional on one hand, and alternative on the other. In reality however, food systems rarely operate exclusively within these artificially circumscribed boundaries, they dip into, or borrow from, diverse logics over time, as studies within the governance and network theory perspectives, for example, demonstrate. Therefore, a conceptualisation of AFNs based on such a bifurcation represents a rather limited means of abstracting real world activity. A further issue with such an ‘oppositional’ definition is a temptation for scholarship to develop explanations of AFNs primarily in relation to a binary opposite. Categorisations of types of AFN, for example, as either ‘alternative or ‘oppositional’ (Allen et al., 2003), or ‘strong’ vs ‘weak’ (Watts et al., 2005)⁴ may encourage this tendency. That is, although such categorisations might offer some useful ways of thinking about AFNs, the risk is that subsequent studies, when confronted with evidence which confounds expectations about, for example, the beneficial nature and contribution of AFNs, are tempted to account for such evidence by filing it under an ‘outlying’ (e.g. ‘weak’) category - representative of inauthentic forms of AFN, corrupted by mainstream systems - rather than using this evidence as a basis for reflecting more critically on original theories and expectations about food systems, to reassess and re-think them more deeply. In the long term, the risk with oppositional conceptualisations of AFNs is that scholarship tends towards ‘screening for authenticity’ activities rather than engagement in deep, balanced, critical examinations of phenomena, with the result that existing orthodoxies about artificially

circumscribed systems - that do not represent or explain real world food systems very well - are reinforced rather than re-thought.

A second set of concepts which have a tendency towards unclear and inconsistent usage are those denoting socio-economic or cultural phenomena which exist as underlying trends or shifts, not directly observable to researchers. Such concepts are useful within a research community to allow for efficient signalling and exchange of ideas relating to the dynamics of observable phenomena and the forces impacting on them. However, this usefulness is weakened if the meaning of such concepts is ambiguous and/or their empirical basis is contestable. Here it is argued that the usage of two concepts in AFN research – the ‘quality turn’ and ‘defensive localism’ - exhibits these problems.

The concept of the quality turn was introduced by Murdoch et al. (2000), in an article which explores the dynamics of contemporary food systems and discusses the usefulness of ANT and conventions theory as approaches to explain such dynamics. In the article, the ‘turn to quality’ is presented as a new economic trend in contemporary food systems, a countertendency to prevailing forces of globalisation and industrialisation which seek to outflank the constraints of nature. The authors see the trend as manifest through increased consumer demand for local foods ‘high in natural qualities’, the key stimulus being heightened safety and nutrition concerns in the wake of BSE, E. coli, and similar high profile food scares. As both a term to denote a real world trend, and an explanation of the key driving forces behind this trend, the quality turn has been employed subsequently in a great many AFN studies. However, the explanation of driving forces may be open to question, particularly if

one refers to relevant empirical data regarding food choice. In the UK for example, although consumer studies confirm that demand for local and regional foods has grown in the period concerned, a multiplicity of motivations are reported, of which food safety concerns appear rarely as the most important (Enteleca, 2000; IGD, 2002; IGD, 2005). Moreover, market data reveal that within 3-4 years of the onset of the BSE crisis, beef consumption levels had recovered to pre-scare levels as many consumers were motivated by reduced prices (Thompson and Tallard, 2003). The emphasis on food scares in the quality turn, therefore, potentially downplays other plausible drivers of consumer demand, such as endorsement of local and regional food by celebrity chefs and sustained championing of localisation in middle to highbrow media, not to mention the increased availability of such foods due to policy support shifts (e.g. CAP reform, restructuring of regional administrations), which released new funding and support streams to potential producers. Hence, the composition and relative importance of real world forces underpinning the quality turn remain open to question.

Like the quality turn, 'defensive localism' is a concept which has been employed repeatedly in AFN research since being coined by Winter (2003), yet it may be also be questioned in terms of meaning and empirical basis. The term is introduced by Winter in the context of a key argument that some communities who engage in AFNs do so out of conservative desires to defend themselves against a perceived threat from outside forces, rather than involving themselves in more ecological forms of food provisioning. The existence of defensive localism is derived from the results of an empirical study, in which it is found that a greater proportion of residents claimed to buy local food than organic (73% compared with 50%), and an account of a regional

newspaper's response to the FMD crisis, which involved a sustained anti-government, buy local campaign. Although a reasoned deduction, alternative conclusions could be drawn from this evidence. For example, in the context of consumer research, 50% of residents claiming to buy organic food could be reasonably regarded as a high proportion, reflecting substantial levels of ecological concern. Furthermore, the strong tone of the newspaper campaign described could be seen as an understandable response to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding FMD, but one which was perhaps atypical and not representative of wider community views, and/or the agricultural community outside of the flashpoints of the crisis itself.

It is not the intention here to argue that the quality turn and defensive localism are inherently flawed concepts in themselves. On the contrary, both have much potential as expressions of ideas about the shifts and dynamics underpinning certain food systems, and their ambiguities in meaning and empirical foundation are understandable given their relatively recent articulation. The critique relates to tendencies within AFN scholarship to refer to recently coined terms such as these as if they were unambiguous and unquestionable, instead of employing them cautiously, as theoretical proposals to be explored, debated and tested. Without such care and caution in the usage of all key concepts in AFN literature, scholars not only risk subsequently misinterpreting or misunderstanding each other, opportunities are missed to uncover alternative and potentially more plausible accounts of the evolution of food systems, along with chances to develop more satisfying and robust theories to explain their dynamics.

4.2 Conflation of spatial/structural characteristics of AFNs with desirable outcomes, actor behaviours and food properties

A second problematic feature that exists within AFN scholarship is a tendency towards certain conflations regarding the phenomena studied. As with the unclear use of concepts, the existence of conceptual conflations and their implications for knowledge progress has been well recognised (e.g Hinrichs, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). This section seeks to build on such work by separating out and explaining three specific areas of conflation, that is, tendencies to conflate the spatial or structural characteristics of AFNs with specific (i) desirable outcomes, (ii) actor behaviours and (iii) food properties.

The first area discussed here concerns the tendency to conflate the structural or spatial characteristics of AFNs with socially, economically and ecologically desirable outcomes. To express this another way, there exists in some parts of the literature a fundamental assumption that food systems which operate on a restricted geographical scale, or whose relationships are structured in unconventional ways, inherently deliver more just, equitable and ecologically sound outcomes. Definitions of AFNs which express the inherent characteristics of such systems in terms of their desired outcomes, it may be argued, are illustrative of this conflation. For example, those which describe AFNs as systems which ‘redistribute value’ and ‘reconvene trust’ (Whatmore et al., 2003), enhance ‘re-embedding of farming towards more environmentally sustainable modes of production’ (Renting et al, 2003), or which are committed to ‘social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable production, distribution and consumption’ (Jarosz, 2008). As highlighted previously, political economy scholars (in particular) have brought attention to this conflation,

arguing that within the studies concerned, concepts like localism have become overly romanticised (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), when in fact “specific social or environmental relations do not always map predictably onto the spatial relation” (Hinrichs, 2003: p36). To avoid such characteristics/outcomes conflation, they encourage conceptualisation of AFNs in terms of socio-political processes - which can reproduce the power imbalances and injustices of mainstream systems as much as overturn them - thereby giving more rounded analyses of what AFNs are and their potential outcomes (Goodman (2004). However, perhaps the most convincing critique of the conflation between food system spatial scale and beneficial outcomes is that provided by Born and Purcell (2006) which, although written from another disciplinary background (planning), may be seen to share some aspects of governance and network theory perspectives of AFNs. Specifically, Born and Purcell argue that spatial scale is not a goal or end in itself but a strategy employed by sets of actors pursuing certain agendas. In relation to food systems therefore, desirable outcomes such as social justice or economic viability are not inherent to systems operating on a local (or any other) scale, they depend on the orientation of the actors putting the scalar strategy in place. Greater understanding of the operations, dynamics and socio-economic impacts of food systems will be achieved, therefore, by research which examines protagonists’ goals and strategies free of prior assumptions about how spatial scale and outcomes are interwoven. Born and Purcell’s argument relates specifically to the conflation of the scalar characteristics of food systems with beneficial outcomes, but it can also be applied to conflation between structural characteristics and outcomes. Thus, it can be argued that types of AFN characterised by unconventional governance arrangements, such as CSA, depend less on those characteristics to achieve desirable outcomes than they do on the motivations of the

key protagonists, how they interact and develop modes of working. Born and Purcell's arguments offer a satisfying, if blunt, reinforcement to the various arguments and evidence in the AFN literature that contest headline claims about the benefits of such systems: the reason why scholars should not be surprised by such evidence is that it is misguided in the first place to assume that AFNs, by their scalar or structural nature are necessarily devoid of disbenefits.

The preceding section has highlighted the importance of paying specific attention to actors' goals when researching AFNs. However, it is precisely in relation to actor behaviour and goals that a second tendency towards conflation occurs in AFN research. That is, in some parts of the literature, an assumption exists that the spatial or structural characteristics of AFNs inherently attract and retain, or should attract and retain, participants who prioritise goals of justice, equality and sustainability, driven by heightened senses of altruism, morality, or a radical political agenda. In some areas of the literature, it is the networks themselves which have political or altruistic aims attributed to them, rather than their participant actors. Thus, in some political economy work, a view pervades that notwithstanding the sometimes disappointing realities, localism initiatives *should* represent left-leaning, participative movements, whose purpose is to oppose the dominant forces of capitalism and its attendant injustices. Why should such blurring between the structural characteristics or properties of phenomena, and the goals of participants within those phenomena, be problematic? Because by defining a food system according to value-laden goals, or those of its participants, there is a risk of intellectual constraint in a process similar to that described for 'oppositional' definitions of AFNs in Section 4.1. That is, in delineating AFNs as food systems where certain virtuous goals and agendas are

pursued, researchers may consequently dismiss too readily as imperfect and ‘outlying’ any systems found to exhibit apparently non-virtuous goals, hence overlooking them for further examination and deep scrutiny. The reasons why some AFNs, in reality, pursue apparently unjust goals may therefore go unexplained beyond initial judgements, whilst equally, instances of altruism or justice in conventional systems go unscrutinised, e.g. the convenience store franchisee who operates informal credit arrangements for disadvantaged suppliers and customers, or the intensive dairy farmer who is a pillar of the local community. Instead of staying with these complex realities, a temptation amongst those who ascribe specific goals to AFNs is to make increasingly hypothetical versions of the desired systems the main preoccupation. Resulting theories or conceptualisations risk becoming tautological, increasingly less relevant to reality and therefore less able to explain it. It may be argued, for example, that the ‘reflexive localism’ vision of DuPuis et al. (2006) is representative of this dynamic. That is, the authors, having demonstrated convincingly how existing localism initiatives fail to fulfil their potential as radical movements, either because they lose the struggle against capitalism or get hijacked by political elites, then propose a more rarefied, idealised vision of localism which imposes a heavy if not unrealistic burden of pre-conditions and responsibilities upon participants in terms of skills, aptitudes, dispositions, etc. Although such hypothetical work certainly has a role in progressing knowledge in AFNs – the concept of reflexive localism, for example, does take thinking forward to imagine how AFNs might have to operate in order to be absolved of imperfections in goals and agendas – alongside it there is a need for work that continues to grapple with complex realities, to find alternative explanations for the pursuit of unjust goals in AFNs and the pursuit of virtuous goals in mainstream systems. Such work, it is argued, can best be achieved by approaching

AFN system goals with an agnostic frame of mind, rather than with assumptions about certain agendas AFNs should be in pursuit of. The governance and network theory strands of literature may have much to offer in this respect, taking as they do the perspective of the local as one spatial scale amongst others, where actors behave according to complex goals and motivations.

The final area of conflation in AFN research is between the spatial or structural characteristics of AFNs and the properties of the foods channelled through them. That is, an assumption exists in some parts of the literature that foods exchanged on a localised basis, or through unconventional governance arrangements, are inherently healthier, safer and more nutritious (Nygård and Storsard, 1998, Sage 2003; Little et al., 2009). It may be argued that two points of conflation are embedded in this assumption. First, that the scale/structure of AFNs determines inherently the underlying mode of agricultural production: i.e. foods in AFN channels are produced less intensively than in conventional channels. Second, that the scale/structure of AFNs determines the selection of foods made available: specifically, that AFN channels, by their nature, offer buyers a healthier selection of products than could be found through other types of outlet. The empirical basis of both these conflations is not clear, as to date no AFN studies have tested quantitatively the link between food distribution channel type and mode of production, nor the relative abundance of 'healthy' food in different types of food system. However, anecdotal evidence alone indicates, for example, that farmers who sell direct to customers, or attend FMs, do not necessarily engage in more environmentally friendly production methods (e.g. Winter, 2003), and that it is clearly possible for buyers at FMs to indulge themselves in a range of foods of questionable healthiness – full fat cheeses and ice-creams, high

sugar baked goods, honey, cordials, etc. Overall therefore, whilst there may be opportunities – perhaps even tendencies - for AFNs in the real world to offer healthier, more nutritious foods either by predisposal to types of production mode or product selection, there is no *a priori* reason for this based on the spatial or structural characteristics of these food systems. To better understand the characteristics of foods channelled through AFNs, as well as their impacts and actor behaviours, it is contended that tendencies towards conflation be addressed, so that concepts such as justice, equity and healthiness, and their possible linkages to food systems, can be tackled from a more open, balanced, perspective.

4.3 Insufficient Acknowledgement of the Problems of Marketplace Trading

A third problematic feature identifiable in AFN research relates to how scholars tend to approach buyer-seller interactions in face-to-face marketplace fora, most notably FMs. It may be argued that it is in relation to FMs, perhaps more than other types of AFN, that positive, beneficial claims are headlined. Buyer-seller interactions in FMs are portrayed typically as superior to those in conventional exchange fora, exhibiting characteristics such as depth, reciprocity and intimacy, whilst the positive impacts for community vibrancy are enthusiastically extolled. Potential problems in FMs, in contrast, receive much less attention, in spite of the existence of critical work. Thus for example, scholarship in the rural sociology and development perspective, particularly studies which conceptualise fora like FMs as social constructions, have brought attention to problems in their symbolic representation, as well as buyer-seller relations (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Sage 2003). Moreover, a long tradition exists in the political economy field of critical analyses of marketplace exchanges, including critiques based on the capitalist instincts of farmer-vendors, which pose risks for

exploitation in exchanges (Goodman, 2004), and perspectives from urban sociology, which emphasise how the processes of power play by urban elites (social and institutional) may lead to problematic relationships with rural suppliers (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Building on some of these ideas, this section articulates two specific areas of potential difficulty in marketplace exchanges.

The first area relates to the nature of person to person interactions in FMs. In the literature, a headline claim is that the marketplace characteristics of FMs – individual stallholders selling their own produce face-to-face with end buyers in an open setting – create the conditions for high quality interactions and relationships. However, there is no *a priori* reason why these same conditions preclude the existence of less desirable qualities in vendor-customer relations, such as apprehension, manipulation, malfeasance or exploitation, and the studies within AFN literature mentioned above have theorised and demonstrated that such features can emerge. Examinations of buyer-seller interactions in marketplaces by scholars from other disciplines, moreover, reveal other dimensions of these interactions, broadening and deepening the insights further. Thus, in consumer research, studies argue that participant involvement in alternative fora can exhibit tenets of Vleben-style status competition (Thomson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007), whilst others, by conceptualising such fora in terms of their degrees of formality and festivity, reveal the experiential and dramaturgical nature of the interactions (Sherry, 1990). A good illustration of a study following the latter approach is the ethnographic analysis of a Midwest urban FM by McGrath et al. (1993), in the field of retailing. Through exhaustive longitudinal fieldwork, the complexities of FM vendor-customer interactions are exposed in all their subtle sophistication: the tensions between stallholders and customers over

product price and appearance; the etiquette surrounding bargaining or negotiation; the hierarchies of dominance that emerge between different types of customer; and the processes of identity construction and consumption that go on both amongst vendors (e.g. as experts, entertainers, farmers), and customers (e.g. as ecologists, homemakers). Importantly, the insights this study contributes are augmented by the fact that the authors treat the FM marketplace as a *problematic* forum, a destination ‘to which participants flock for mutual corroboration and confirmation’, a staged event requiring careful, balanced deconstruction by the researcher to be understood satisfactorily. The concept of staged authenticity has long existed in sociology (MacCannell, 1973) and has been applied readily in agro-food studies to offer critical insights into commercial fora like gastronomic tours and wine routes (e.g. Bessière, 1998; Brunori and Rossi, 2000). Greater adoption of such a perspective in investigations of AFN marketplaces would, it is contended, yield more insightful explanations of participants’ interactions in AFN marketplaces, allowing genuine progress beyond headline claims that infer such fora are socially unproblematic.

The second area of AFN marketplace trading which, it is argued, would benefit from deeper, more problematic examination, is the process of information gathering and interpretation between vendors and buyers. In AFN research, studies are often quick to extol the virtues of face to face interaction as a means of exchanging information about items in the context of a sale. Indeed, the information that buyers glean from such interaction is often conveyed as inherently superior to that obtainable from a written label or certification. A key basis for this position appears to be that interaction, unlike labels, gives buyers the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification, hence, a greater quantity of information is obtainable. Moreover, due to

the direct contact with producers, the nature of the information itself is qualitatively superior: richer and more reliable (e.g. Sage, 2003), which means buyers can take more control over their assessments (Kirwan, 2004). Although these claims about information exchange may certainly hold true some contexts, certain pre-conditions deserve to be highlighted. First, the superiority of face-to-face interaction depends on both vendors and buyers having the time, space and motivation to generate and exchange the desired quantity and quality of information. In practice, these conditions may well be rarer than headline claims assume, because most survey evidence reports FMs participants' liking of the opportunity to interact in FMs, rather than actual levels. The evidence that does exist on the latter is cautionary, for example, Kirwan (2004) suggests an average vendor-buyer interaction of 30 seconds, twice a month. This calls into question the degree and quality of information being exchanged typically at FMs. A second issue with the superiority of information from face-to-face interaction is that it rests on a view of such interactions as being free from the normal distortions and interference that arise in habitually in social intercourse. From a critical sociological or psychological perspective, it may be argued that FMs are loaded with such interference. For example, even before approaching any one stallholder, buyers at FMs form impressions about the nature of the occasion and how to behave, by constructing meanings from the overall presentation of the market, the appearance and behaviour of the vendors, and of other browsers. These then influence which stalls they might linger at and which they might avoid, what questions they might ask and of whom, and how they might interpret the responses. The freedoms buyers feel to agree with or to challenge vendor claims ('is that item really organic?'), to demur or pursue particular issues ('is that Soil Association organic or the vendor's own definition?'), and ultimately to purchase or decline ('well I'll buy a small

amount, as I don't want to cause offence'), are also dependent on the intricacies of social intercourse. Therefore, although buyers' judgements about the quality and desirability of items may indeed be derived on some occasions from the full and frank exchange of information with vendors, they may equally be based on incomplete snippets from overheard discussions, impressions formed by the age, sex or clothing of a vendor, or from a sense of desire or obligation to 'think the right way' in the context of the occasion. Ultimately the contention here is that, *a priori*, the information gathered from face-to-face interaction is not necessarily superior or inferior to that obtainable from written labels or certification, it is different. As such, a balanced approach to the analysis of its contexts and usage is needed, to build new insights and progress knowledge.

4.4 Continued Lack of a Consumer Perspective

The final problematic feature in AFN research is a continued narrowness of perspective which underplays the contribution that consumers make to food systems. That is, an on-going preoccupation exists with the needs of actors situated upstream in the supply chain, most notably agricultural production managers, at the expense of others in the chain. This tendency is also discernable in scholars' reflections on the value or worth of AFN initiatives, for example in terms of how they might enhance the well-being of a community, as the reference point tends to be the same upstream actors, thus perpetuating a continued production orientation in both research agendas and policy prescriptions. Where the needs and goals of other actors are mentioned, these are often presented as dovetailing with those of agricultural producers, hence the possible tensions that might occur go underexplored. Criticisms about a lack of consumer perspective are certainly not new, and many studies have already argued

convincingly about the problems with scholarship which privileges the interests of agricultural producers - in particular family farms - over those of other actors (e.g. Hinrichs and Allen, 2008), in particular consumers (Goodman and Dupuis, 2002; Goodman 2003; Goodman, 2004; Venn et al. 2006). Empirical studies have begun to pay more attention to downstream actors in AFN channels (Ilbery and Maye, 2005b, Ilbery and Maye, 2006) as well as consumers themselves (Kneafsey et al., 2008; Little et al., 2009), and such work has been valuable in revealing the complexities of actors' food procurement choices and, in the case of consumers, in demonstrating how food practices often reflect a conscious rationalisation of trade-offs between different goals. Building on some of the ideas in such work, the paper here focuses on two underplayed consumer issues in AFN research: first, the full welfare implications of consumers' engagement in AFNs, and second, the assessment of the socio-economic value or contribution of AFNs from a deep consumer perspective. In both cases, the example of localisation-based AFNs is used to illustrate. It should be noted that throughout this section, the term 'consumer' has been applied to denote actors who are typically the recipients of outputs from food systems, as distinct from those invested occupationally in production. Although it may be argued that this term conveys a rather reductive view of such actors, it will be seen from the arguments presented here that the author supports the view that in future such actors should be researched more holistically as 'people', in all their complexity, ambiguity and multiple social contexts.

The first issue concerns the welfare implications of significant consumer engagement in localised food initiatives, that is, the consequences of consumers' active decisions to make purchased local food – from FMs, farm shops or specialist retailers - a

significant proportion of their diet. In AFN literature, empirical studies of localisation initiatives frequently report the reasons why consumers want to support them and the benefits they perceive in doing so (e.g. Kneafsey et al., 2008). In contrast however, the reasons why consumers do not buy from local outlets tend to receive much less attention. As a result, headline claims about consumer involvement in localisation initiatives give an impression of overwhelmingly positive impacts on their welfare. Yet potential problems exist, a good example being the implications for (female) household labour. That is, following Little et al.'s (2009) argument that a large proportion of local food tends to be fresh and unprocessed, greater engagement with it implies the need for greater time, effort and skill on the part of the consumer to prepare and cook it⁵. Greater engagement also implies more effort spent on planning and shopping tasks: as individual local outlets are more dispersed, with smaller and less reliable ranges of products than mainstream outlets, greater effort is required to obtain the individual items needed to compose a series of meals. In both cases, many consumers would perceive the opportunity costs of such effort as high: i.e. it prevents engagement in other, potentially more productive or pleasurable work or leisure activities. Indeed, some existing empirical evidence, although case-based in nature, supports the premise that the household labour impacts of food localisation are not insignificant. For example, in their account of a 12 month commitment to a '100 mile diet' in British Columbia, Smith and MacKinnon (2007, cited in Desrochers and Shimizu, 2008) estimated that the time they spent acquiring and preparing food was comparable to holding down a part-time job. Historically too, Laudan (2001) reminds us of the eagerness of populations to escape the 'tyranny of the local', and how new convenience foods from industrialised channels were essentially liberating for large sections of the female population, whilst in a contemporary context, Carrigan et al.

(2006) identify mainstream sourced convenience food as a useful resource for mothers dealing with the stress and tedium of everyday meal provisioning. Overall, it is not the intention to argue that all effort expended on food tasks as a result of localisation is inherently unproductive or undesired by those involved. Indeed, Kneafsey et al. (2008) report at length the deep, positive experiences of consumers resulting from their engagement in different types of AFN, which reinforces how these activities can be deeply rewarding to participants and integral to their quality of life. Rather, it is to argue that a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the impacts of localisation requires research which explores in more detail the welfare problems, tensions and trade-offs for consumers, as well as the advantages and benefits. Such insights are most likely to be forthcoming from perspectives deeply empathetic to the needs and concerns of consumers as people, viewing these as distinct and legitimate in themselves, rather than as auxiliary to the interests of the producer actors they are purchasing from.

The second issue relates to a lack of consumer perspective in assessments of the socio-economic value of AFNs. It has already been argued that when theorising on the socio-economic contributions of AFNs, the primary reference point for many studies is upstream actors rather than others in the supply chain, including consumers. Nevertheless, claims are asserted about the positive contribution of AFNs to consumer well-being. In relation to localised food initiatives for example, it is argued that as these systems provide a source of cheap, fresh, unadulterated food, they contribute to consumer health and economic well-being. Furthermore, as they bring consumers into closer contact with types of people that they would not otherwise meet (i.e. upstream food supply chain actors), they contribute to consumers' social and cultural well-

being. Finally, as they help consumers to know more about where their food comes from, how it is produced and linked to the earth, they contribute to consumers' educational, even spiritual well-being. Why do these not represent a genuine consumer perspective on the value of AFNs? Primarily, it is contended, because they are statements of hope about the spin-off benefits to consumers of food systems whose primary purpose is to address the needs of producer actors. A genuine consumer perspective would involve framing the issues in an opposite way, whereby consumer needs are articulated as the key socio-economic problems for researchers and policymakers to solve, and the relative merits of a range of actions and initiatives to address them are then evaluated, of which AFNs would be only one type. Such a perspective would likely generate more equivocal evidence of the power of AFNs to enhance consumer well-being. For example, if consumer access to inexpensive, healthy food in an area is framed as the key research or policy problem, then the setting up of a supermarket may be more effective than a localised initiative (Dawson et al., 2009). Similarly, if a lack of social cohesion and community vibrancy in an area is the central problem, a variety of food and non-food related initiatives could address this, perhaps in a more inclusive or more accessible way than an AFN, e.g. diet and health support groups, history, heritage, sports or leisure clubs. Finally, if environmental education and/or spiritual wellbeing are the issue, then researchers and policymakers have a whole range of possible initiatives to consider as potential tools: faith groups, adult and life-long learning initiatives, travel and exploration societies, and so forth. Overall, AFNs may indeed have the power to enhance various dimensions of consumer wellbeing, but any evaluation of their ability to do so should take account of a range of other possibilities, rather than assessing their contribution in isolation. By taking a deep consumer perspective to the question of well-being, i.e.

by viewing it as the primary goal of research or policy endeavour rather than a set of subsidiary concerns, a more realistic and balanced assessment can be made of the potential of AFNs to contribute to it.

5. Future Research Recommendations

The aim of this paper has been to offer a review and fresh critique of the literature on AFNs. It has introduced key theoretical perspectives taken by studies in the field and summarised the main arguments and evidence relating to AFN characteristics and impacts, both beneficial and adverse. Building on existing critical work, it has then presented and explained four problematic features evident in AFN research which may impede knowledge progress. The paper now concludes with future research recommendations aimed at addressing the problematic features identified. Knowledge has come a long way, but much remains to be understood and explained in this fascinating field. It is hoped the ideas presented below, and throughout the paper, will stimulate further debates and exchanges to move the agenda forward.

The first recommendation is for future studies to incorporate a greater cross-fertilisation of ideas from different theoretical perspectives. In this paper, three main perspectives have been introduced and their distinct contributions to knowledge explained. Research which draws from two or more such perspectives, it is argued, would likely offer richer, more balanced analyses, yet it is rare for individual studies to go beyond a perfunctory acknowledgement of more than one theoretical perspective. Hence, this paper supports calls by political economists such as DuPuis and Goodman (2005), for studies in the rural sociology and development field to

examine more intensely the ‘politics of space and place’ - the struggles of political processes in different scales and the winners and losers of those struggles – as well as the relationship dynamics between local and supra-local actors. Equally however, Sonnino and Marsden’s (2006) emphasis of the value of behavioural approaches is supported, which involves conceptualising AFNs in terms of the beliefs, motivations and constructed meanings of the actors directly involved, on the basis that these may add a dimension to political economy explanations of AFN dynamics. Furthermore, it is argued that studies from either political economy or rural sociology perspectives would be enriched by some incorporation of governance and network theory perspectives, not least due to the more agnostic position of these perspectives, and their meso-level institutional emphases.

Second, in light of the fact that AFN research is conducted from different theoretical perspectives, this paper calls for future studies to pay greater attention to how conceptual and ontological positions are presented and explained: specifically, that these should be as transparent and well-defined as possible. In terms of setting out concepts, enhanced transparency and clarity would minimise risks of misunderstandings between scholars of different perspectives, and also help to ensure that these concepts do continue to be genuinely useful building blocks for explaining real world phenomena, rather than somewhat fuzzy abstractions. In terms of setting out ontological positions, the specific call here is for studies which are more explicit and reflexive not only in what is considered important to research in food systems and why, but also in the value judgements attached to phenomena in those systems. Thus in relation to future work on consumers, it is recommended that studies at least explicitly explain, and self-critique, the assumptions made about consumer

involvement in AFNs (e.g. that such involvement represents (or should represent) a radical political act, or that it results in overwhelmingly positive impacts on consumer welfare, or that it indicates something of the general moral worth of individuals). Such a Weberian approach to analysis – which expects social science research not to be value-free, but rather to explicitly recognise the values ascribed to phenomena – may help to address problems of unquestioned conflation and conclusion in the literature, such as those presented in the critique.

Whilst the preceding recommendations relate to how AFN research is conceptualised and theorised, the third relates to the empirical dimension. Specifically, the call here is for greater rigour in the design and execution of fieldwork, and for a greater variety of perspectives and methods to be employed. In AFN research, the favoured empirical methodology is clearly the case study, although studies from different theoretical perspectives do follow distinct techniques. Case studies are valuable for exploring and explaining process, interaction, and the dynamics of system evolution, and hence are well-suited to the field. Often however, case studies in AFN research appear to play a primarily demonstrative role - to show or reveal the existence of a phenomenon introduced as a pre-defined concept in a study's contextualisation. The risk with this approach is that empirical material becomes a confirmatory adjunct to a pre-determined argument, rather than a source of complex insights upon which arguments can be tested and refined. Hence, this paper calls for case studies which are explicit in advance about what they propose or expect to find empirically and why (the Weberian analytical approach again), but thereafter adopt balance and rigour in the execution and analysis of fieldwork, so that data are allowed to challenge or problematise expectations, and are seen to do so. The conscious gathering of data from sources

which might question a prevailing narrative is encouraged for this reason (e.g. in a FM case study, gathering data from lapsed vendors, occasional customers, and/or local small shopkeepers), as is the collection of different forms of data, such as structured and quantitative material (e.g. FM vendors' average returns from attendance, and proportions of these in terms of overall incomes, or price comparisons for consumers). It may be argued that some of the problematic headline claims about marketplace trading critiqued earlier could be, in part, a function of over-reliance on 'demonstrative' case studies, and these recommendations may help to address those problems.

Many arguments in this paper have been based on emphasising the value of questioning, critical approaches to scholarship, hence the fourth recommendation is a specific encouragement of research which does this more. Specifically it is a call for examinations of unfamiliar phenomena in familiar places and vice versa, and also for scholars from different theoretical perspectives to undertake studies of subject matter overlooked or avoided to date within their fields. Thus for example, studies which consciously set out to explore the nature and dynamics of trust, cooperation and reciprocity in multiple retail chains are encouraged, as are those which examine how guilt, obligation and exploitation emerge in the interpersonal dynamics of an FM. In terms of theoretical perspectives, political economists might usefully turn their attention to industrial districts and SME clusters, examining their nature and dynamics and analysing how well political economy theories can explain these, whilst rural sociologists may reveal new knowledge about global commodity chains by employing their community focus and social construction perspectives to those phenomena. The benefits of taking such consciously contrary approaches in AFN research are that not

only could these offer opportunities to uncover unexpected and intriguing insights about the phenomena itself, but by being placed outside habitual frames of reference, scholars from different perspectives have the chance to learn more about different ontologies and epistemologies. Both benefits, it is argued, may lead more directly to knowledge progress in AFNs.

The recommendations began with a call for more cross-fertilisation of ideas from different perspectives within AFN research: to conclude, the paper calls for more incorporation of perspectives and ideas from disciplines outwith the field. This could manifest itself in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it could involve AFN researchers engaging more actively with studies of relevant phenomena conducted in sectors other than agrifood, such as studies of alternative social networks in urban sociology (e.g. Leyshon et al., 2003). Or, it could involve borrowing from hitherto under-used theoretical perspectives which have potential to shed new light on the evolution of phenomena such as AFNs: e.g. the social historical perspective employed by Hinrichs and Allen (2008), in their comparison of Buy Local and other ‘buycott’ campaigns. Finally, it could involve greater engagement with studies of AFNs conducted by researchers in other disciplines. In this paper, reference has already been made to intriguing and stimulating work by researchers in planning, retailing and consumer research, but there will be many more examples. Open and active engagement with other work and perspectives such as these can yield valuable new insights and new ways of thinking in AFN research, and hence this activity enthusiastically encouraged.

Footnotes

1. For the purposes of this paper, the terms ‘mainstream’ and ‘conventional’ are applied interchangeably to denote types of food production and distribution system which have come to dominate markets in developed countries. That is, systems heavily reliant on industrialised methods of food production and processing, global sources and means of supply, corporate modes of financing and governance, and an imperative towards operational efficiency.
2. These groupings capture the main arguments and evidence relating to negative social and economic impacts of AFNs. A discussion of physical environmental impacts is beyond the scope of this paper, however work which questions the positive environmental effects of food chain localisation is treated in some depth by Desrochers and Shimizu (2008) and Oglethorpe (2009).
3. Although even this basis is somewhat ambiguous, because Renting et al. (2003), for example, describe short chain AFNs which can be ‘extended’ to distant actors, such as Fairtrade product chains. Clearly such chains represent a very different dynamic to the face to face encounters at a FM.
4. Other classifications and typologies, which are not based so overtly on binary opposition have more investigative potential, e.g. Ilbery et al.’s (2006) distinction between local and locality foods, Renting et al.’s (2003) territorial vs ecological emphasis, or the categorisations of Marsden et al. (2000). But such classifications have yet to take account of, and disentangle, a full range of ‘alternative’ features AFNs, as described in the previous paragraph.

5. Although this argument assumes that consumers generally buy less fresh produce, and engage in a different cooking repertoire, when purchasing from mainstream outlets, which may be erroneous: fresh and unprocessed foods are of course available in supermarkets

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